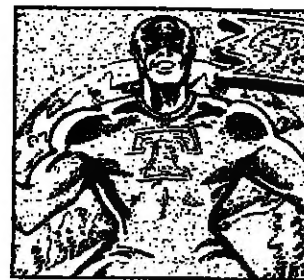




**City breaks**  
*Nicholas Woodworth visits the Belgian city of Bruges and Giles MacDonogh takes a long hard look at Calcutta*



**Hotels**  
*Ian Holmes tells you how to stay in all the best places - at considerably reduced cost*



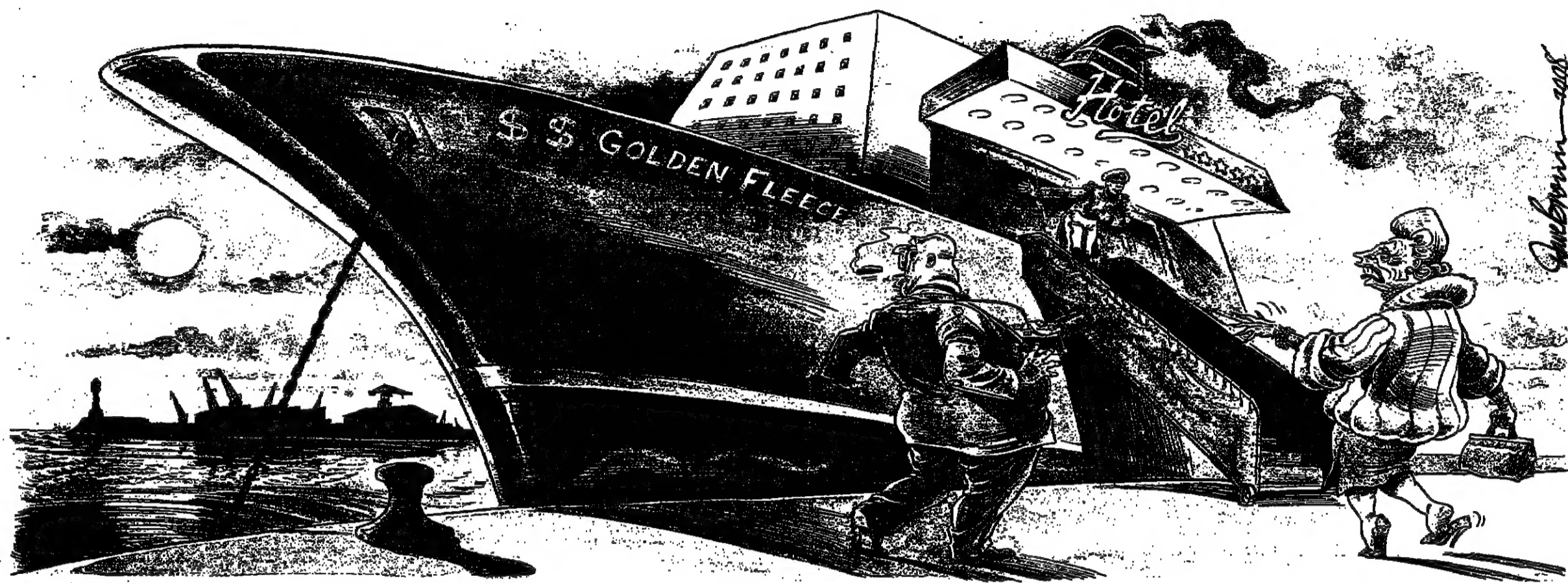
**Gone skiing**  
*Arnie Wilson joins the Europeans thronging to North America this winter when he visits Telluride in Colorado*

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Page 12

# Cruising for a bruising



Cruising is back in fashion, the Titanic aside. To start our 12-page travel special, Bill Glenton gives the low-down on the high-life

**I**t used to be all that nautical mystique that made cruising a big turn-off for many. Risking seasickness was had enough without being made to feel even more landlubberly. Now that has changed.

The present upswing in cruising owes much to the way lines have jettisoned shipboard terminology and traditions and begun operating ships like hotels in order to make passengers feel more at home.

Bigger, better stabilised vessels have also diminished the perils of queasy stomachs. Yet there remains one unsettling mystery of the deep that has become even worse for many planning a holiday afloat.

Knowing port from starboard or a binnacle from a barnacle is child's play compared with steering a safe course through the minefield of cruise pricing. It needs a computer or a degree in maths to work out value for money.

Judging what one should pay for one ship, when it can have more than 30 different fare categories, is complex enough but consider how incredibly complicated the task can get when multiplied by more than 200 ships. That is before taking into account all the many discounts and add-ons.

Not puzzling enough? Then try to solve the conundrum created by the way all those charges can change from one voyage to the next as well as seasonally. No wonder that many people find making a decision is a hit-and-miss affair.

Even when you have decided on a particular vessel, judging value differences between fare categories can be puzzling. A higher price does not always mean more for your money. All too often fares are based more on deck level than on differences in standards.

What will seem equally mysterious are the wide variations in fares, regardless of distances and areas cruised or of how far you might have to fly to join a ship.

Why should it cost noticeably more to sail around the Baltic than the Mediterranean? Stranger still - why can't it be as cheap to cruise in the Caribbean as around Europe? I could go on about the quirks of cruise pricing but it would only create more confusion.

Far better if I offer some useful advice on how best to gauge cost and value. What is also needed is a handy yardstick by which it is much simpler to judge the overall price and quality differences between so many ships.

For that reason, I have worked out what I call the Average Daily Rate (ADR). Based on all the fares charged for different categories in all the seasons, on all routes, along with total passenger capacity, it provides an easy way of judging the differences, regardless of length of cruise and where and when it takes place.

The table on Page 2 gives a clear idea

of the very wide variations in costs - as much as \$500 a day. To a large extent, it also defines quality - although there are quite a few anomalies, particularly in the crowded mid-ADR sections.

This is also where you can find some best buys and better value. But in using the table it must be borne in mind that the figures are averages and that a particular cruise can have a higher or lower average daily rate depending on route and especially the distance you have to fly to join.

Different ADRs can also be due to special factors rather than shipboard quality, such as adventure trips in a Russian icebreaker or expensive theme cruises. The size of ship and amount of amenities are no criteria either. Most top-class vessels are quite small, while many cheaper ones are in the super-size category. Some high-priced luxury cruises have tipping and drinks

**Very few cruise companies divulge how much flying will cost you, yet it is a big factor in determining value**

included. The low cost of some is because you fly by cheap charter while some lines provide scheduled services in business class seats.

The air content part of the fare has a big bearing on where one can find the best or worst value. One reason why cruising around Europe can be comparatively expensive is because flying costs more. Caribbean trips are often good value partly because of better priced transatlantic flights.

Few companies divulge how much flying will cost, yet it is a big factor in determining value - particularly when it is long-haul, say to somewhere like south east Asia from the UK. To get the best return on your money your cruise should get longer the further you fly. A two-week voyage is far better value than a short one with the air cost forming a much smaller percentage of the price. An alternative is a cruise-and-stay package with one week afloat and one at a resort.

Those three- and four-day mini-cruises are poor value with lines almost always charging a higher ADR for them. Lines boast that cruising is a truly complete package but there are still add-ons. Watch out for "port charges" that can add \$100 or more and for more mysterious "handling" charges.

A few companies stick seasonal and special voyage extras in the small print. In a lot of ships there is a 15 per cent service charge for drinks. This is on top of the normal tipping for cabin and table stewards described as optional but markedly publicised. The minimum recommended is usually \$5 (\$3) a day per person but it is often more. With rare exceptions you must also pay for excursions ashore and this can add \$100 plus to your spending.

There is a happier aspect to all this with almost all lines offering good discounts nowadays as competition for your business intensifies. Definitely shop around, as these reductions vary widely from 10 to even 50 per cent, although 15 to 30 is more the rule.

Most are of the advance booking kind but are sometimes offered at the last minute when business is slow. There are also cut-price deals with free cruises for spouses, upgrades and free flights.

I wish there was the same good news for singles but many companies still charge them up to double fare for lone use of a cabin. However, some reductions are appearing - down to 35 per cent add-on in one case. You might try insisting on a cabin for yourself for the ordinary fare as it sometimes pays off when bookings are slack.

Families have always been catered for with special rates although some depend on you sharing the cabin with the offspring. Look for lines that have a cheap rate for children having a cabin of their own. The cut-off age for youngsters varies between 12 and 16 while a few lines have an older teenager reduction.

Some lines, usually among the more expensive, refuse children altogether. When deciding on the ADR appropriate to your pocket and needs make sure, by multiplying it by the number of days in the cruise, that it represents a reasonably average cabin in the chosen ship.

It should be a two-bed outside cabin on a mid- or almost-mid-deck level, around the halfway mark in the tariff. You can always pay more for something better so long as there is an obvious increase in quality.

Your choice might lie between buying the best cabin in a cheaper ship or a similar priced but lower category one in a more costly vessel. So long as the latter meets your needs I would recommend it first. It is the overall quality of a ship, its standards of food and service that count most while you spend more time out of your cabin than inside it.

If you believe everything in the average cruise brochure all the ships are floating five-star grand hotels. My ADR table may not solve all your costing problems but, at least, it will show you which stars are the brightest.

Turn to Page 2 for Bill Glenton's table on the average daily cost of cruising

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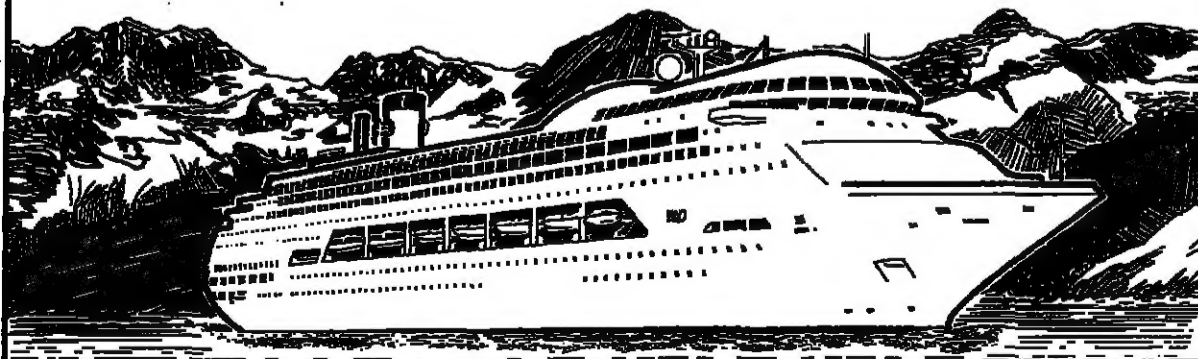
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## CITY BREAKS

Talk about contrast. Do you prefer the quieter charm of 'old Europe' or the noise of an Indian metropolis?

I arrived in Bruges prepared for a stiff dose of Culture. Who wouldn't, in what is universally acclaimed the best-preserved medieval city in Europe?

If my suitcase dragged on the age-old cobbles outside my hotel, it was because I had come heavily armed with a deadweight of guidebooks, maps and suitably learned tomes. And if my head spun as I checked in at reception, it was because already I was confused.

Was St Giles, the venerable church I spied on the far side of the street, Renaissance or Baroque, Romanesque or Gothic? Was that bricky bit sticking out of it a buttress, I presumed - flying? Or was it one of the more banal sort? I hadn't the faintest. I could see right away that for anyone less than a master of medieval studies, the art, architecture and history of Bruges pose something of a challenge.

Just navigating the city was a challenge for me. To walk from the Hotel Jacobs to the square known as the Markt in the very heart of Bruges, the receptionist told me, took precisely 7½ minutes. To help she handed me a city map. Circular in shape and surrounded by canals, Bruges looked something like an eyeball; the fine tracery of lines not bloodshot veins, but a horribly complex network of winding streets and alleys. Out I set.

One hour and 53 minutes later, my map dangling useless at my side, I emerged, dazed, on to the great open space of the Markt from a side street.

No wonder, I thought, the Dark Ages had been so confusing. But this was just the beginning. I had in my possession a pamphlet of walking tours of Bruges. Itinerary A, "Incomparable Bruges", comprised no fewer than 29 sites scattered throughout the city.

Only an army survival course graduate could have followed the maze of arrows on the accompanying diagram. Dare I recklessly set out again, I wondered, in pursuit of the road-kill organ of the Gothic cathedral of St Salvator? Were the heraldic decorations on the mausoleum of Charles the Bold



Bruges: In its 14th century golden age, as now, it was a showcase city, its buildings, art and lavish civic life intended to illustrate its wealth and power

Harm Grootenboer/Alamy

## A walk in the Middle Ages

Nicholas Woodsworth throws away the guide books when he explores one of Europe's medieval cities

worth the risk of becoming lost? And just how long would it take, if I ever found it at all, to locate the 15th century chapel of the Minsters' Guild?

Common sense prevailed. I decided to begin with the much closer Stadhuis - the oldest Gothic town hall in Belgium - just a stone's throw away on the Burg.

An hour or two later, directed by the always reliable but invariably dry-audist *Blue Guide*, I had inspected the building's octagonal turrets, gazed at the wooden ceiling with its double row of six hanging

arches, and perused the 12 painted circular vault-keys. I was halfway through the wall paintings of the history of Bruges when the moment of realisation came.

Behind me was the image of Derrick of Alsace, count of Flanders, bringing the Relic of the Holy Blood - the city's most venerated object - to Bruges in 1180. Ahead lay the picture commemorating the foundation of the Order of the Golden Fleece by Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, in 1430. The afternoon, like the wall paintings, seemed to stretch on forever, and suddenly I realised I was

bored. No doubt these tableaux were all eminently worthy, the very stuff of Low Country High Culture, but I knew I could not go on.

I looked out of the window. Crowds of people were milling in the Burg Square below. Were they heaving about thick histories of Bruges? Were they attacking medieval culture conscientiously, methodically, and with a ponderous sense of duty? They were not. They were carrying packets of French fries and mayonnaise, and they were enjoying themselves. Snapping shut my *Blue Guide* for

the last time, I joined them.

Minutes later, emerging from a queue with my own packet of chips and mayonnaise - is there anything more evocative of true Belgian culture? - I began a much more relaxed exploration of Bruges.

This was a city, I discovered as I began haphazardly zig-zagging about with a total disregard for method, where scholarly details buried in erudite works are unimportant. The whole point about Bruges is that the Middle Ages, made manifest in some of the most elegant brick and mortar ever

assembled, sit right there in front of your eyes.

And so I wandered the streets, gazing around like everyone else, at a thousand medieval marvels - towers and turrets, cobbles and crenellations, posterns and pinnacles. Some surprises, like the massive, 400ft spire of the Church of Our Lady, built entirely of bricks, came in large sizes. Others, like the lovely little statues of the Virgin perched in tiny niches on anonymous corners, were more intimate.

Here was an infinite variety of architecture so unfamiliar and complex, so different from the slapped-up functionalism of our own age, that the humblest almshouse looked as rich as the opulent Stadhuis.

On the Markt, I joined a crocodile of tourists, wound my way up the 366 steps of the imposing Belfry, and gazed out over the stepped gables, to the flat, misty, green polder; only when driven down by the crash of the carillon did I descend.

On Rozenhoedkaai, a scenic place of canals and old arched bridges, I hopped on a tour boat and saw Bruges' wonderful brick skyline from an even more seductive

angle. When it began to rain we were all issued with European Union umbrellas patterned with circles of gold stars on a blue background; we finished the cruise feeling like a delegation of European parliamentarians. It was only after a large waffle and a couple of glasses of *genever* - full-flavoured gin - that I began to feel normal again.

Over the next couple of days I viewed Bruges from all sorts of perspectives - from a horse-drawn carriage, from the depths of a Belgian beer cellar, from a pew at a Sunday morning service of Benedictine nuns at the Beguinage convent. And everywhere in the smart restaurants, luxury shops and upmarket hotels that proliferate, I found myself surrounded by vast numbers of pleasure-seekers like myself.

Is medieval Bruges spoiled by crowds of tourists? Purists with weighty cultural guides may tut-tut and say it is today an artificial sort of place, a medieval theme park of a city given over to philistines. But in truth, things have not changed much since Bruges' 14th century golden age under the Dukes of Burgundy.

Then, as now, Bruges was a showcase city. Capital of the Hanseatic League, the most powerful economic alliance of medieval Europe, its buildings, its art, its lavish civic life were intended to illustrate to the world at large the wealth and power of its traders. And the world responded, with admiring foreigners from across the continent flocking to trade.

And so if, today, tourists cluster about Bruges shop windows hesitating between Cointreau-flavoured chocolate truffles and Grand Marier-flavoured chocolate truffles I cannot fault them. Thus has it always been. If I finally resolve such distinctions myself, I can then move on to even more difficult ones, such as the difference between a flying buttress and an ordinary one.

Nicholas Woodsworth's weekend in the Hotel Jacobs in Bruges was organised by Kitter Travel, specialists in European short break holidays, 3 New Concordia Wharf, Mill Street, London, SE1 2BB. Tel: 0171-281 3333.

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## Calcutta's pungent frenzy

Giles MacDonogh finds charm and interest amid the dirt

There are few places in the world as intensely urban as Calcutta. True, there is the wide expanse of the Maidan between the Chowringhee "Esplanade" (as they once called it) and the river Hooghly. This is still sparsely occupied.

Only the Edwardian Victoria memorial, with its great dome, a tolerant jumble of Indian nationalism and Raj statuary, and the inaccessible Georgian Fort William have been granted permanent residence so far. The rest of the city gets its revenge for the Maidan's airiness: bamboo hovel is piled on brick and marble, and not an inch remains uncoated by the grease and grime of humanity.

If you like cities, you will like Calcutta. In spite of the dirt it has plenty of interest. They say it was once famous for its order and cleanliness; that the hydrants under which the arches perform their incessant ablutions were once used to wash down the streets twice a day. Then came the Partition. The Hindus fled the new Muslim state in East Bengal, and the population of the city more than doubled. There was no longer any room for such niceties as street cleaning.

There is plenty of violence in the excellent English language press. Dacots, or bandits, stage regular hold-ups in the suburban trains which leave from Howrah Station, across the river; bus or train drivers who harm the passengers hanging precariously from their coaches and carriages are "gheraoted", or beaten up, by other commuters. Homicides are a speciality, dowry-murders in particular.

But no Bengali, it seems, is prepared to countenance a banal killing: victims are doused with kerosene and set ablaze; tortured to death or hacked limb from limb; or in a memorable recent murder, baked in a *tandoor* oven.

They are the spiritual descendants of the Thugs who used to go to the Kali temple for the goddess's blessing, after ritually slaughtering a black, male scapegoat. These days visitors to the temple are



The image-makers' quarter of Calcutta

Adam Hooper

more likely to be fleeced by the smooth-talking Brahmin who acts as guide than attacked by Thugs.

Few taxi drivers seem to respond to English, which means stopping passers-by until one can be found who is able to interpret. In theory, they are allowed to add 60 per cent to the sum on the meter, but you are

fragments of sumptuous decoration and ironwork are still visible in the courtyards. One which still preserves decorum is the Marble Palace, a vast private museum which generations of Mullicks stuffed with job-lots of western painting, statuary and porcelain.

A modern Mullick was brought out to meet me in a dhoti and vest. He wanted a catalogue from London. The address? "Oh just send it to the Marble Palace, Calcutta."

Most of Calcutta's rich have moved to larger, free-standing villas in the south of the city, but in the teeming streets, behind those rotting facades, there is still an elegant life lived by old families in their air-conditioned apartments.

A well-bred Calcutta resident has great recourse to clubs. There are about a dozen of them: the Bengal Club in Macaulay's old house; the Calcutta Club; the Saturday Club; the Cricket and Football Club, with its lively pub-like bar which swims in whisky and soda on a good night; and the Rowing Club, to name but a few. The Tollygunge Club in South Calcutta, with its golf and sporting facilities, is one of the most popular, with a 15-year waiting list.

Bob Wright has just resigned as senior member

after 25 years in the job, although he told me he had retained his position at the "Royal" Turf Club on the Maidan. When he arrived the club was moribund, his predecessor having been summed down at his desk.

These days it is the place to spot those people who still go by the name of "yuppies" in Calcutta, sipping malt whisky in the fourth floor bar with their mobile telephones at the ready.

In the 50th anniversary year of Indian independence, Calcutta is festooned with images of Bengal's own hero, Subhas Chandra Bose, the "Netaji", who backed the wrong side by seeking support in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Japan to end British Ascendancy in India. Many Bengalis still refuse to accept that Bose died in an aircraft crash in 1945, or that he married an Austrian during the war and had a daughter.

Publication of some of their letters in the papers a few years ago led to ugly scenes when Calcuttians set fire to newspaper stalls.

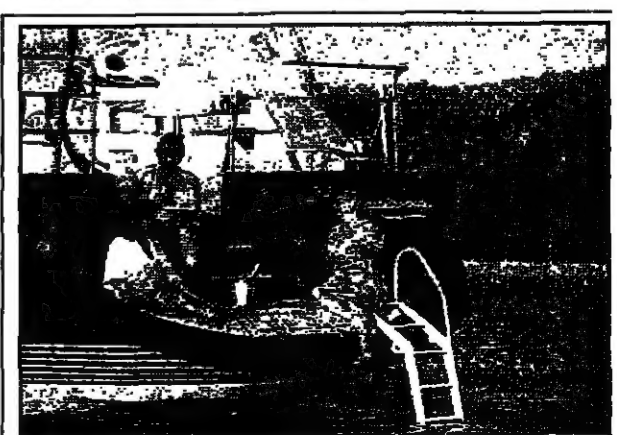
It is said that the local Bengal government has finally grown tired of the city's anarchic nature and taken steps to rid the streets of the beggars and hawkers, the goats and cattle which rendered progress so slow.

Pictures in the papers show the demolition men capsizing shanty towns, and the journey from Dum-Dum Airport has certainly become quicker. But it will be a long time before Calcutta loses that pungent frenzy which is such a large part of its charm.

British Airways flies direct from London to Calcutta. A Pex return is £909 plus tax of around £20 for a minimum two-week stay. Tel: 0845-222111.

Among specialist tour operators in Britain which can include Calcutta in their itineraries are: Abercrombie and Kent (0171-730 9600); Bales (01306-740048) and Cox & Kings (0171-873 5000).

For more details of getting there from the UK, Ireland and North America read India, The Rough Guide, (Penguin Books, £14.99).



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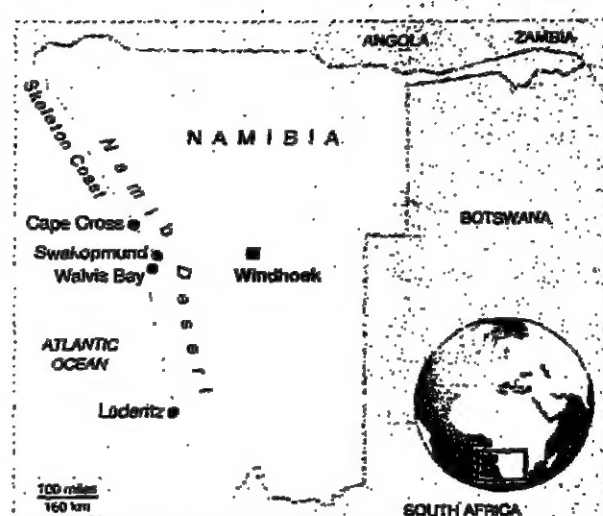
# A bit of Bavaria in southern Africa



**SOUTH AFRICA**

inland plains are the frame of houses, remnants of bigmond mining communities which faded away long ago. On the coast, half swallowed by sandbanks, are the hulls of wrecked ships.

Occasionally you might catch a glimpse of an ostrich or an oryx or an off-road vehicle (visitors can tour by 4 WD or hot-air balloon).

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## THE CARIBBEAN

# Rum, life, the universe and creole

James Henderson finds very different West Indian tastes and talk on Martinique and Guadeloupe

A h...créole, Monsieur... words spoken longingly, almost lyrically, by a French West Indian, against a background of Caribbean waves. He was visibly warming to his subject and I could see we were settling in for a long evening. But then I was not about to complain. I had joined a small after-dinner crowd in a waterfront restaurant in Guadeloupe and we were enjoying a bottle of white rum and discussion:



Losing her head: Josephine's statue

James Henderson

of life, the universe - and creole. The word creole actually means "originating in the West Indies", but, of course, it is intensely evocative: spiced food, famously alluring beauty, bewitching rhythm and dance and a near-mystic language or patois. Almost an incarnation of the exotic. It is an inextricably complicated heritage, with strains from around the world which have then been baked in the tropical sun, creating some-

thing new, something that is more than the sum of its parts.

The word has also become associated with the French Caribbean, and it is fun to tease out French roots. In Martinique and Guadeloupe, France hits you in flashes: in the mannerisms, the coquetry, the unutterable stylishness and of course in an infuriating nonchalance. So many of the good things of French life have been adopted in creole form. Linger in restaurants after meals is just an example.

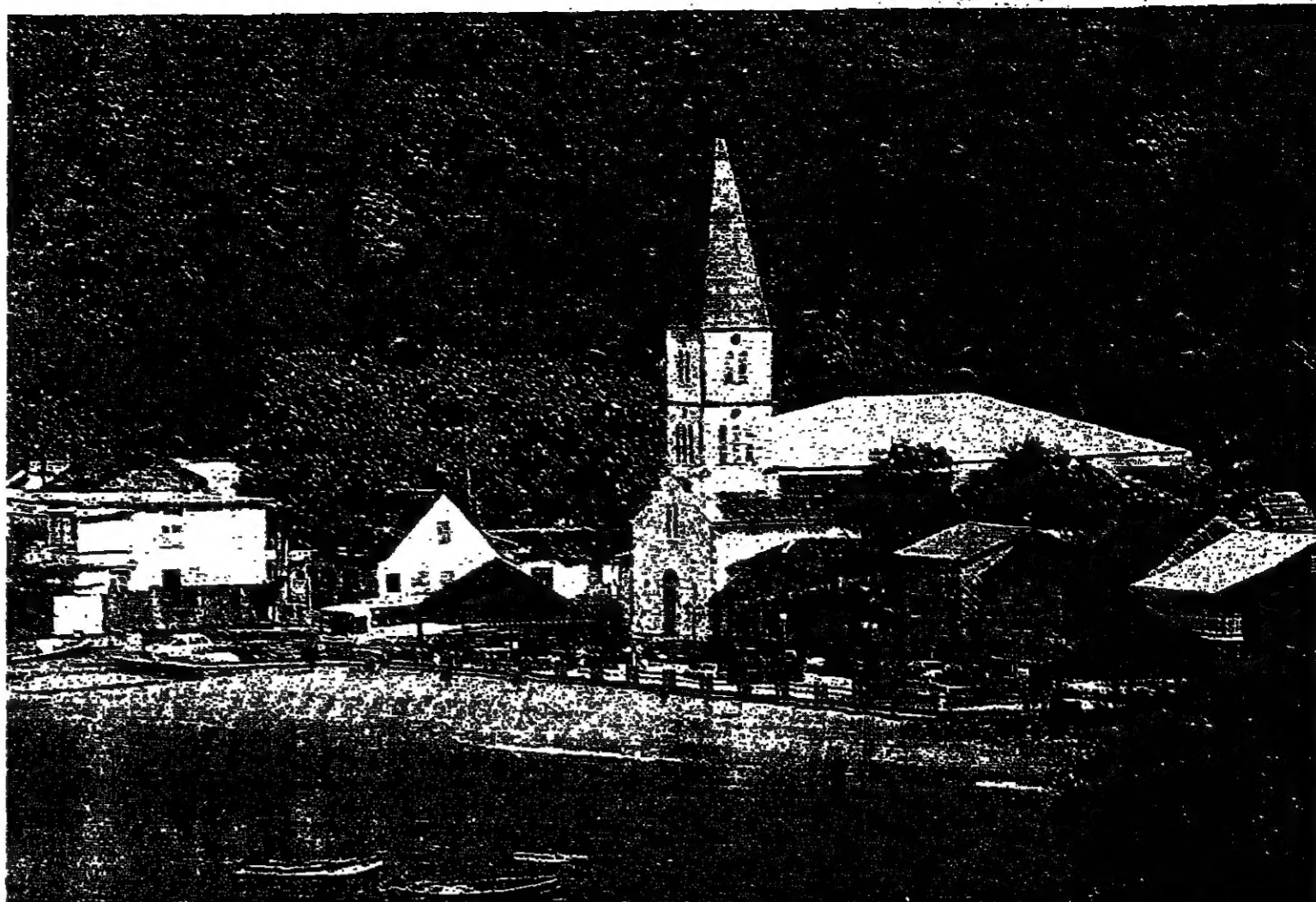
For all the Caribbean friendliness, the way I had been drawn into the crowd had a surreal French edge to it. I was just swilling the last of some passion fruit seeds in a viscous sump of white rum, when the man walked on to the veranda and said in passing: "Bon appetit, M'sieu."

We fell into conversation from there.

As you might imagine, there is a certain ritual in the repeat. The appetit is a fruit-flavoured rum or a petit punch: rum, sugar and a lime squeezed to near annihilation. It gets the gastric juices going. I opened my dinner with an assiette créole: crab-back stuffed with saltfish and spices, seafood and vegetable fritters and a couple of local crayfish.

Martinique and Guadeloupe are untypical of the Caribbean. They have the same fantastic physical setting and climate, but it just takes a trip to Dominica (the island that lies between them) to see how much more prosperous and developed they are than their neighbours.

Incredibly, they are a part of the European Union.



Annes d'Ariete, Martinique: along with Guadeloupe, the island is far more prosperous than its other neighbours

James Henderson

France took a radically different path from Britain and turned its islands into overseas departments, with the same status as the metropole (as mainland France is called) and the same standard of living. This involves huge financial support.

The connection with France does not come without its contradictions. They are expected to be French. And this in a century of self-determination, when most of the neighbouring islands have severed their colonial links. Unsurprisingly the islanders are intensely proud of their culture and insist the creole way of life is more than simply France in the tropics.

As a main course I opted for a fillet of local fish marinated in lime and cooked quickly in spices, with a sweet potato purée and a gratin of christophine (a local vegetable with the crispiness of cucumber and the sweetness of pepper).

In origin, creole cuisine is family based and can be compared to a French regional cuisine. Again there is a tantalisingly mixed heritage of African and French, with a considerable eastern input in the spices.

Wine is another side of French life that has been willingly adopted, although it does not really go with the warm climate or the food.

The colonial dilemma crystallised earlier this century in a literary and consciousness movement, Negritude. There were demonstrations. You still see occasional creole slogans: *Franse Devo* (French out), *French out*.

The dilemma is all too plain. They are unable to feel fully in control - they

want more autonomy to run their own affairs and the freedom to express their creole culture - and yet the prospect of going it alone was too terrible to contemplate.

Guadeloupe, traditionally the more radical of the two sisters, has considerable reason to be grateful to France, which has rebuilt the island after Hurricane Hugo in 1989. Plenty to agonise about over a bottle of rum anyway.

But before that, I finished off my meal with a *banane flambée*. I could hear it crackling and crisping as it cooked, in rum that tingled and burned under the tongue.

In Martinique, there was a moment of delicious irony recently. Bonaparte's Josephine came from Martinique, but she is remembered ambivalently (to the tourists she is the exotic creole woman, but to the locals she is the woman who made

Napoleon reintroduce slavery). She may have survived the revolution (she was married to a nobleman at that stage), but a few years ago Martinican radicals knocked the head off a statue of her and hid it.

At this stage we were just drinkers remaining, musing and looking out through palm trees that were playing on the evening breeze to a sea glistening with the moon. The chef appeared, bringing an aged rum from behind the bar.

My friend became wistful again. "Creole is... it is a different sensibility," he said, "a sensuality, something beyond the Cartesian limits of European life..." In a flash I saw what he meant, but then the impression imploded. My thoughts chased their tails - wasn't the whole setting, with its demands and discussion of culture, so alarmingly French as to make the whole thing tautological? Surely

only a Frenchman would ever talk like this.

Perhaps it was the rum. His particular bughbear was the creole language itself. It is true that parents will often talk to their children only in French, although they speak creole between themselves. It helps them "get on" in a French-led education system.

He talked of a 12-year-old girl who had refused to acknowledge the language. "She was the same colour as me, M'sieu (mid-brown), and yet she called the language of her ancestors, 'uneducated and unrefined, a childish language'. I was so angry that I was ready to explode... like... like... yes, like a bottle of champagne, shaken up to bursting." I had to laugh. It was a telling choice of phrase.

■ *Maison de France can provide a list of tour operators from the UK. Call 0891-944123 (at 50p per minute) or fax 0171-493 6894.*

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## Riding in the wild west – Wales, that is

Gillian O'Connor finds plenty of wide open spaces in south Pembrokeshire

John Owen is a modern Viking, who travels by catamaran. His broad cheekbones, the tow-coloured locks squashed beneath his helmet, and his barrel-like chest all declare his ancestry. But, as his name suggests, Owen is a Welshman, and he will be catching the cat from Pembrokeshire, on the west coast of Wales, across the sea to Ireland. His quest is one which would appeal to his Norse forebears: he is looking for a stallion.

Like all true quests, it seems a touch unnecessary. John Owen already has plenty of horses – around 180, although he cannot be sure. He knows when one is missing, but never bothers to do a precise count: the population changes daily. For Owen is a horse farmer. (The helmet is for riding, not raiding.) He breeds horses, buys them, sells them, and charges people for riding them. But different horses do different jobs.

The glamorous side of the

business at East Nolton is the stud, where he and his family breed quality competition horses and ponies for showjumping and eventing. Every breeder's dream is to sell a youngster which then develops into an international competition star.

It is the determination to turn that dream into reality that is sending John Owen to Ireland in search of another stallion. He already has two, but needs another: incest is not good for the bloodline. There is a three-year-old stallion on a farm in Ireland which might suit, but only if the price is right.

Visitors to East Nolton are allowed to stroke the stallions' noses. But no ordinary rider is likely to get astride the competition horses. They are too valuable and too stumpy – "sharp" in horse jargon, meaning that they respect good riders but do not suffer fools gladly.

Fortunately, this does not matter. For 100 yards from the stud farm, the Owens have a second yard, with an old aircraft hangar chock-full of horses possessed of infinite patience. They are known as the "trekkers", which conjures visions of gangs of sodden holidaymakers plodding across the Brecon Beacons.

But these horses run jolly fast. Start at one end of a deserted two-mile beach, and canter against the breeze to the cliffs at the far end. Turn around and canter back the way you came. By now, you are probably out of breath. But the Nolton trekker isn't.

Indeed, if you have the stamina and the leg muscles, it will take you on up the Owens' private valley, to canter along a network of gorse-enclosed hillside trails. Here even the novice can feel like a professional showjumper, as his horse pops over a series of little jumps.

Then it is home through the fields at the top of the cliffs overlooking the bay, next door to the Pembrokeshire Coastal Path. Weekend visitors may be surprised to find themselves helping to round up the cows for milking. Fortunately, even large black and white Friesians seem a lot smaller when you are looking down from a horse.

Nolton trekkers come in a staggering variety of shapes and sizes. Feather-footed giants, like

medieval war horses, are stalled next door to round-barrelled Thelwell ponies. There are a few nice-looking hunters and jumping ponies, but most are unusually sturdy. John Owen, who must weigh a good 220lb, rides all but the tiniest, and they still run like blazes.

Safe horses and good riding bring repeat business and recommendations. One visitor first heard of the stables in a bar in Piccadilly in central London. The only directions were "Take the M4 motorway out of London and keep going until you reach some stables by the sea." He found them.

The various holiday packages on offer include up to five hours' riding a day. That is enough to leave most weekend riders with

a few aching muscles and a sense of achievement. But what if it rains or you don't like riding?

If it rains, tough. That is what riding coats are intended for. And anyone who ventures into Wales without a good waterproof coat needs their head examined. There is an obvious reason why the grass is greener than anywhere else outside Ireland.

People who do not ride but like beaches, walking or birds should find plenty to keep them busy for a few days.

Clouds of birds, from rooks to oyster catchers, make Trafalgar Square look a bit short of pigeons. The red kite remains elusive, but other birds of prey are commonplace.

The scenery is pleasant rather

than spectacular. But the great attraction is that for much of the year you will be sharing it with only a handful of other people. The National Parks Authority keeps a stranglehold on development – to the delight of visitors and the fury of many locals.

The Pembrokeshire coast is not the place for lovers of night life.

■ John and Ruth Owen, East Nolton Riding Stables, East Nolton Farm, Nolton, Nr Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire SA62 3NW. Tel: 01437-710360, fax: 01437-710867.

East Nolton rents holiday cottages, and offers bed and breakfast packages. The amount of riding included can be varied to suit visitors' tastes.

■ The Druidstone Hotel, Druidston Haven, near Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire, SA62 3NE. Tel: 01437-781221.

■ The Mariners Inn, Nolton Haven, nr Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire, SA62 3NW. Tel: 01437-710469.

## The land where the eagles dare

Michael Wigan goes river rafting on the Taku, in an area virtually unknown outside western Canada

A man ducks under bushes and starts sifting brown leaves. He picks the driest, one is half dry, so he tears off the wet bit. He snaps sticks from the undergrowth.

He builds a tepee, layered leaves, twigs, leaves. Soon the campfire ashes splutter into little flames. He fills three blackened pails and sits them on the grid-iron, along with kettles and cans of water.

The river speeds by, still-laden, salmon-thick, fringed with giant cottonwoods. No habitation is visible. No one lives upstream, no one downstream: for this is country in which 9 ft of snow recently fell in three days. Five bald eagles soar, three in brown immature plumage.

High up in the scree beyond the tree-line of black spruce a huge allivertip grizzly, 700 lb of hunger concentrated in one of the nimblest, most ambidextrous predators, chases mountain goats. The bears cannot usually catch these square-chested goats of the Rockies, which can sprint down almost sheer slopes and take refuge on ledges; they wait for slip-ups.

Twenty-two humans materialise from riverbank tents. Abutments are followed by food – omelettes made with green peppers and wild mushrooms, clipped into a home-made tortilla roll, preceded by porridge laced with dried fruit and nuts.

This was the start of a day river-rafting in the Canadian Rockies. The river, the Taku, is unheard of outside western Canada, yet its slide to the sea is a route of peerless grandeur and forms a major wildlife corridor.

The odyssey had commenced at higher altitude on the Sheslay River. Our five-seater aircraft had swept down from its alpine backdrop on to a bush runway where the wings clipped

the enveloping saplings. Philip, a 16-year-old Briton, had wandered into the woods and was confronted by a grey wolf at 20 yards, a once-in-a-lifetime sighting even for occupational outbackers.

Days passed as we floated the Sheslay on four inflatable rafts, each steered by a centrally positioned oarsman guide using long paddles. At testing bends, and in backwaters, we paddled too, thrashing into the currents and eddies, keeping clear of the fallen trees. The raft's draught was just 3in, yet it weighed 1½ tons. The water swished along, in the otherwise silent, giant, glacial passes.

Ian Keen, the 31-year-old

**Bears are universally interesting. Grizzlies can run at 30mph uphill, swim and climb trees**

leader, had given us a safety pep-talk. If anyone fell out of the raft, he said, they were to be offered the T-bar of the paddle to haul themselves in. If that was missed a rope-bag of rescue coils was supposed to be thrown. If they floated off alone, then lying on their backs in a life-vest with bent knees, they should look for mild backwaters to swim into. Hydraulics – vortexes caused by waterfalls – sucked swimmers down and ran them along the river-bed and, theoretically, spat unpanicked punters out further downstream. So far so good.

We beached the rafts so that Keen could reconnoitre. River heights change haz-

ards. He returned, announcing that the next passage would be "a little technical". Manoeuvred by a flurry of changing instructions, our lead raft negotiated a swelling hydraulic. We paddled to the bank and watched the others, tipping suddenly down an 8 ft drop, paddling frenziedly, turning the raft in a narrow eddy, and spinning out to safety. "It's so easy when you do it right," said Keen, the tightness fading from his face.

Bears are universally interesting. Grizzlies can run at 30mph uphill, swim and climb trees. Those on the Sheslay never see people. One of our party, a banker made intrepid by the seductive flexion in a fly-rod, crossed a tributary and disappeared into heavy timber.

A few minutes earlier fellow rafters had watched a bear swim the river and lumber into the trees, too. Our eyes were fixed to the spot. Our first sight was of the man's panama hat. Reassuringly, it was still on his head. Reaching the water he began nonchalantly casting and paying out line. He and the bear had come face-to-face over a tangle of fallen trees. The banker had talked quietly to the bear and backed off, leaving room for the resident.

There were five teenagers in our group. On a rafting trip in wild country, with bears for company, was the course of a river unwrapped from plateau stream to the bay by Juneau, Alaska, where the ragged fringes of brown water meets the aquamarine of the Pacific Ocean, teenagers can spill themselves out unhindered.

They made constructions. Strange perpendicular arches protruded from silt mud, creeks were dammed, lagoons created. They imitated the beavers who have to go on engineering, lopping lumber, lest their teeth grow through their lower jaws.



There are any number of opportunities for adventure holidays in Canada. This group is riding the rapids on the Thomson River in British Columbia

Quentin Mawson

They propelled stones far over the surging water. They paddled and paddled, in unstructured abandon. Slap-happy adults joined in.

There were lessons there, too. At the mouth of the Yeth River the scene was pitiful. More than 100 king salmon lay dead in the heavily silted floodwaters.

We examined them. The female's two long pockets of eggs were glistening red. The male's yogurt-like roe was also intact. The irony was acute. America and Canada have been at virtual war about salmon exploitation.

The Canadians had even taken the high-risk step of impounding an American ferry. Trollers, netmen, let-

sure anglers, and native Indians have all been squabbling over shares in this rich renewable resource. Now, having evaded the lot, on the point of helping restore its depleted race, the kings had been knocked back by a natural calamity.

Salmon is still everything on the Taku. Native Tlingit Indians built their commemorative deadhouses and settlements where the salmon ran thickest, by the clear-water tributaries. Licensed netmen can earn a year's wage from the ten-week bonanza.

It is thought sockeye and coho salmon may run this river in cohorts of 300,000, vastly outperforming, in

fecundity, Europe's Atlantic salmon. In suitable places on the lower Taku, paddle-wheels ladle migrating salmon into holding tanks for tagging. Catch limits are set from the information yielded by reported tags.

Ian Keen's River League does things right. The guides cooked to perfection and worked their hands hard. In a forever empty land of rock, water, wild fruit, and forest, they read the wrinkles of the river, lead day-long hikes into goat country, play chess, and strum guitars under the stars. One Indian guide filled us in on local lore. On their rafting trips men get boyish and boys manly.

Return rafters are numerous. One second-time rafter told me he had dreamed of Canadian rivers 40 times since his initiation the previous year.

■ The River League's office is at: Ste 201-1112 Broughton Street, Vancouver, BC, V6G 2A8, Canada. Tel/fax: 604 684 6871. Price \$2,075 per person from Juneau, Alaska.

## Alone against the elements

Peter John's sailing trip turned out to be more of an adventure than he had bargained for

The goal was the Friesian islands, off the north coast of the Netherlands, where Erskine Childers placed his turn of the century spy novel – *Riddle of the Sands*.

On a South Coast One Design sloop, built 33 years ago in Bosham, Sussex, my father and I crossed the North Sea from Ramsgate to Flushing and sailed through central Holland.

We had eaten, steamed mussels in Bruinisse, on Keete Maastgat, where the central importance of shellfish was summed up by the town centrepiece – an enormous bronze bivalve.

We had ducked past 160-metre barges on the busiest canal in Europe to shelter at the staff marina of IHC Smith – an aquatic motorway pull-in where a Dutch woman cheated to us for half an hour. The only two words we understood were Princess and Diana.

And there was the night convoy through Amsterdam, when 14 bridges and one lock are opened in suc-

cession for boats trying to get to the northerly IJsselmeer. Then my father jumped ship at Amsterdam and I reached a gateway, both geographically and emotionally. At Harlingen, the waves barreled in from the west, piling in uncomfortable clusters.

The wind turned the outer harbour into frothy mullet soup and blew a livid scum into the inner harbour. The weather centre at Branderis was discouraging. It recorded a wave height of 2½ metres and a wind strength up to Force Seven – not a hurricane but fast enough to be stopped for speeding in built-up areas.

I had been driven back once, scared by the first "real" weather in nearly two weeks. So I huddled in this Dutch East India company trading port at the *fin d'Europe* and soaked up the *fin de secon* atmosphere. My copy of *Suomen Way* remained unopened as I dreamily thought about *The English Patient*; the image of a lone intellectual rescuing a gorgeous heroine came to mind.



Now a day's sail away from the target, I wondered whether I was brave enough to make the last leg, let alone travel the 200 miles back to Britain on my own. Having fantasised about secret channels and, if not cracking a foreign invasion plan, at least finding my way to some tarry fishing community, my courage was fading. It received a further test from a man training for his skipper ticket. When I men-

tioned my destination he told me the main Schulpengat channel marked on the 1987 chart had silted up.

It was becoming clear that *Riddle of the Sands* was sometimes economical with its navigational truth. This was a complex area with the volatility of the Bay of Biscay. In a westerly wind, the north sea rolls easily towards the coast in depths of 30 or 40 metres. Then, it hits a ridge and bunches to

produce short chop which funnels in at ferocious speeds between the islands. A couple of weeks with a boy scout compass, a lead line and some Lamb's Navy Rum is not enough.

When I finally forced myself away from the shelter of the Harlingen cut, comfortably sheltered between dark bars and converted spice warehouses, I double-reefed the mainsail and tied myself into a life jacket, safety line and wet weather gear.

Six hours later, the sail was torn at the last reefing point and the boom traveller behind the tiller was buckled by the force of the wind. It took an hour against the tide to make the final two miles.

Once there, West-Terschelling did not seem very remote. The supermarket magazine rack, like magazine racks throughout Europe, was dominated by tribute shots of dead Diana. For diesel, I had to cycle three miles on a grocer's delivery bike to the only petrol station on the island. I

thought the pump attendant might have some interesting thoughts on curing rebs but he asked what I thought about Oasis.

I was flattered to be mistaken for a sideburned Britpopper. And, depressingly, I realised I could remember when continental European points of contact with the UK were the Beatles and George Best.

The attendant was on his way to visit London and asked if it was dangerous. I said: "It's no more dangerous than any other city."

"Oh," he said, crestfallen. "People say Amsterdam is dangerous." We were approaching the question from different ends of a big spectrum.

The Netherlands is a small country. After breakfast in Flushing you could hit Harlingen for high tea. But at a level below pop music, the two towns are a good fortnight apart.

■ The Netherlands Board of Tourism 0891 717777. Useful reading is Brian Navin's *Cruising Guide to the Netherlands* (Imray Laurie).

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## THE PHILIPPINES

# With thanks to a four-legged friend

Jack Barker comes to rely on canine help to guide him through the latticework of 2,000-year-old rice terraces in central Luzon's mountains

I left the bargaining to Sandy, a Hong Kong Chinese student in commerce who could probably have obtained a 50 per cent discount from Harrods, as she hammered out terms to transport myself and three of her friends to the start of the path.

It was a chastened and bullied-looking driver who headed off to town along a dirt road that threaded through the clouds. Twelve kilometres of mountain hairpin bends and teetering wooden bridges brought us to the start of the footpath. I was off to see the rice terraces of the Ifugao village of Batad in central Luzon, the main island of the Philippines, described by the tourist board as the eighth wonder of the world.

When the jeepney stopped, we set off up the nearest mountain. For an hour's steady climb all went well. Then the path dropped through a series of thigh-wrenching steps cut out of forest loam. I knew we had to lose height sometime.

However, I was expecting the path to go down into a paradise of rice terraces, local houses, and cultural sights, whereas this path dropped through bamboo thickets and dense forest.

Losing height faster than a broken lift, we finally spilled out, confused, on a road - and there are not many of these in the highlands of

central Luzon. The morning's sweaty effort had brought us a couple of miles from our starting point, at the small village of Bangaan. There was a fairly impressive view of some terraces, so I took a photograph. Would this do?

A local woman carrying firewood firmly sent us back. We were not the first to go wrong. Local farmers had upgraded the Bangaan path, feeding a stream of confused tourists to this small road.

**Drops of up to 30ft were made passable with solid steps of rock, jutting out to form walkways**

side village. Already there was talk of erecting a signpost in a part of the world where these are a rarity even at major road junctions.

Too late for us. We had missed a turning, the only one. At the outset we'd been at least 2½ hours from our destination and we still were.

Sandy set her jaw in a stubborn line and Flora looked upset. City girls Pearl and Seng-Sui looked as if

they might cry, dropped back as we climbed the hill, and later gave up the walk.

Flora, Sandy and I were about to get help. As we laboured up the hill from Bangaan a small white dog and a large black one dogged our footsteps, impatiently catching our heels, barreling past and blocking our path with exuberant dog-fights. Knocked off balance, Flora grabbed a handful of thorns and, for a while, our appreciation of dogs was confined to a discussion of their place in the Philippine diet and possible role in ours.

Towards the top of the hill the small white dog headed off into the bush, the black one took over, and chaos gave way to calm as he trotted ahead, glancing back from time to time to make sure we were okay. He escorted us to the turning we had missed and led the way to the top of the ridge, where local tribesmen had set up stalls selling water and soft drinks. They recognised the dog; he belonged to a Bangaan guest house, apparently, and his name was Rex.

Steep steps led down past rice paddies and the first high-walled wooden buildings of the Ifugao. Even though our destination was now spread out to view, more than ever we needed a guide to reach the picturesque heart of the village, framed by terraces of water-filled rice-paddies. We were

told this by an American panting up. "You can get lost down there," he said. "Not us. We've got Rex." It was just as well. The latticed mountain made Hampton Court maze look tame and messy. Rice-paddies carved out of mountain rock with sound-retaining walls built from stone and sealed with clay have been constructed with the precision of the Inca. The waterproof walls enclose paddies that vary in size from just a few square feet to the size of a (muddy) swimming pool, while providing a network of solid paths a comfortable two feet wide.

Even though the Ifugao terraces are not as extensive

as some I have seen in Nepal, the Philippine structures date back 2,000 years and are not just older, they are also far stronger. Drops of up to 30ft were made passable with solid steps of rock, jutting out to form steep walkways, and our route switched levels and directions according to the folds of the mountain.

Leaving us the freedom to make our own mistakes, Rex hung back, only shooting ahead when we stopped, confused, trying to work out a route to the central village of thatched Ifugao houses. We followed, grateful, scrambling down slopes and rushing along walls.

An elderly tribesman in a

rotting T-shirt hastily fitted a headband stuck with scruffy feathers and grabbed his spear as we approached, but the Ifugao's head-hunting days are over and he struck a hopeful pose for an expensive photograph. The beauty of the scene was in the ranked terraces and the thatched roofs of the local houses, adorned with the skulls of sacrificed pigs, and we passed him by.

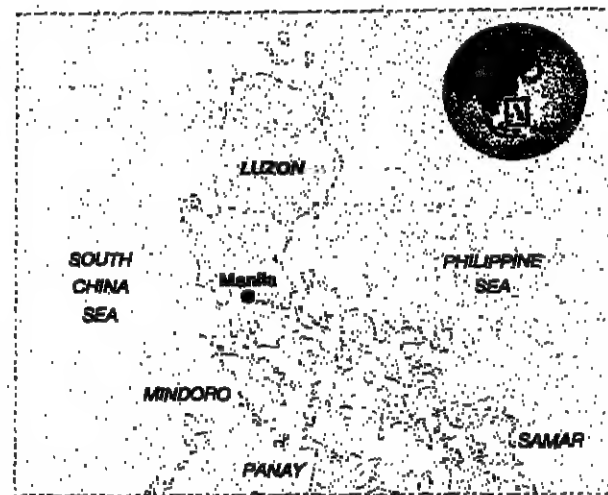
Besides, if we wanted to talk to the locals we had our dog. Not that he seemed to encourage casual conversation. Rex did not want to be patted, was not good at posing for photographs and certainly did not come when called.

But I thought I had his measure when he pulled us up at Christina's guest house and I asked about meat for the dog.

Sorry, came the answer. The Ifugao only ever eat meat on religious occasions and gratitude to a doggy friend was not regarded as an adequate reason for bringing sudden death to one of the pigs or chickens scurrying in the shade of the stilted building and playing tag with Christina's toothless mother.

As we ate noodles and vegetable fried rice on a wooden balcony overlooking the view from the terrace, it became apparent that Rex, as a dog of the developing world, was happy to go vegetarian.

Lunch over, it was time to climb out of the village, through the rice terraces and back to our driver. Rex shepherded us every inch of the way, fighting hostile dogs clear of our path and



## Information for travellers

- Jack Barker travelled to the Philippines as a guest of Singapore Airlines, which has fast and efficient connections via its Changi hub. For reservations call 0161-742-0007.
- Travelling to Batad is a tough job. There is no bus service there is a Bangaan Taxi, but it takes about 1½ hours and takes at least nine hours but only costs about £2. There are various hotels in Bangaan with prices from about £20 per night up to the prime Bangaan Hotel, which charges £50 per night.
- Best time to visit the highlands of Luzon is from March to May, their dry season. However, any time of year will do, as the wet season, though long in the mountains, is not too intense. For the islands as a whole, January to June are generally dry with the best months considered to be in the "cool" dry period from December to May.
- The Philippines is one of the world's more exotic destinations, so beware of tropical diseases, insect bites (they get my Malaria and other travelling hazards. Best guide book is the Lonely Planet Travel Survival Guide by John Pease, £20.95 and packed with helpful information and advice).

guarding us from small children. Where the path forked, we expected Rex to head back to his home village, but clearly he had seen us lost once and wasn't about to let it happen again.

He walked us all the way to our waiting jeepney. The driver recognised the dog

with a smile. "I know that dog. Did he show you the waterfall? His name is Patras." Patras? No wonder he had not come when we called. We tried the unfamiliar name for size. "Patras!" Immediately he ran over, wagging his tail, for a stroke and a pat.

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Day 9 Baltra to Guayaquil. Disembark after breakfast and fly to the mainland and the port of Guayaquil for an overnight stay at the Hotel Colon. Farewell dinner.

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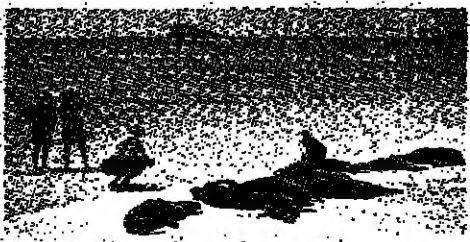
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The Galapagos Conservation Trust is a British charity founded in 1992 to support conservation in these remarkable islands. It is affiliated to the Charles Darwin Foundation (whose Patron is HRH The Duke of Edinburgh) which runs a scientific research station in the Galapagos. You will have a chance to visit this station during your trip and learn about its captive breeding programmes for giant tortoises and land iguanas and other animals. As a way of showing our own concern for conservation in the Galapagos, we shall enrol all our staff and those who travel to the Galapagos with Noble Creations as members of the GCT for one year.

All cabins have outside views, are well planned and offer all you could require for the cruise. The atmosphere is relaxed and informal. There is no need to bring dressy clothing, even for dinner. The small complement of like-minded travellers encourages a spirit of camaraderie and a sense of shared adventure. The guest and local onboard naturalists contribute enormously to your understanding of this world in microcosm.

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□ KIWI DELUXE: In New Zealand, try the luxury lodges scattered round the often unpopulated landscape: Puka Park, in bush above a beach with hot water; Solitaires, near the geysers and mud pools of Rotorua; Nugget Point in Queenstown, home to bungee-jumping, jet-boating and stunning autumn scenery. All, and more, are bookable through Austtravel: +44 01784-882439.

□ BARGE IN: European Waterways' barges aren't quite like sailing the Atlantic in a bathtub. You might find yourself cruising past Loire Valley châteaux in a luxury craft with sundeck splash-pool and sauna, en suite rooms and one crew member to two passengers. Daily excursions and free use of bicycles too. Call +44 01784-482439.

□ TOP OF THE PILES: Brodsworth Hall in South Yorkshire was voted best historical property in Britain in a public poll, ahead of 320 rivals. Open Tuesdays to Sundays from March 23.

□ NO TIES: Brazil's is not the only carnival. Cologne's six-day celebration starts on February 19, when women roam the streets cutting off men's ties. Freudian or what? The big parade is on the 23rd. Go there with Moswin (0116-271 9922); four-night breaks start at £309.

□ SKI-Dr: Virgin Holidays' Ski-D Rom Interactive brochure, an industry first, includes videos of resorts, virtual helicopter tours of three areas, interactive ski trail and street maps, vox pops from holidaymakers, links to Virgin's website, and a crossword puzzle with a holiday as the prize. Cost £10, refundable if you book. Call 01293-744228.

□ SWITCH OFF: Have the remote without the control in a Highlands cottage so isolated it has no television, through Country Cottages in Scotland (0990 851133). With its neighbour, Welsh Country Cottages (0990 851122), it specialises in escapes from modern living... Oh, you want a cottage with a Jacuzzi, or an indoor swimming pool? They do those too.

□ AFRICAN UNION: Next time you marry, why not try southern Africa? Wed at Victoria Falls, with a local choir, and stay at the Tongabezi luxury lodge; call International Travel Connections (+44 01244 35530). Four nights including picnics, walks and river cruises (not flights) from £2,450 for two.

□ LIGHT FANTASTIC: Footprint claims its guidebooks weigh no more than a can of soft drink and are useful for squashing cockroaches. They're certainly lightweight (despite the hard covers) and fact-packed, if not always poetically written. Among 1998 offerings: Israel, Cuba, and the 75th anniversary of its famous South American Handbook.

□ TWITCHING LENSES: Brush up your bird photography on a weekend workshop in Norfolk with RSPB photographer Chris Gomersall. You should see huge flocks of wading birds and geese, and learn how to get best results with your camera. From February 27, costing £209; call +44 01485-210432.

□ STRANGE BEDS: Happy 10th birthday to Distinctly Different (+44 01225 868842), which offers unusual "hotels" around Britain: former castles and chapels, cast houses and warehouses, a bakery and a glove factory. Abroad, listed but not tested, they include Loire cliff dwellings, a Lapland igloo, a US jail and a Thai tree house.

□ RAILROADED: The Trans-Siberian railway is noted for smuggling in China, says the UK Foreign Office: search your compartment for contraband before you start and secure your door.

□ CAN DO: Sate on the Mediterranean coast, houses the latest in specialist museums: La Musée Imaginaire de la Sardine - France's finest private collection of empty sardine tins. Illustrations of man's historic relationship with the sardine; step inside a big tin to see the world from their perspective; eat them at the restaurant. Call +33 487 74 91 75.

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Want to stay in all the best places at the cheapest prices? Ian Holmes has a tip for each month of the year

**W**ake up tomorrow morning in your own beachfront "banda" at Bruno Brighetti's Blue Safari Club, on Manda Island, off the coast of Kenya, and you might well lie back and smile - no doubt tickled by the barefoot luxury of your location, but even more amused by knowing you are paying \$300 (£184) a day less than last week's guests for its pleasures.

Over the course of the coming week, you will save \$2,100 (£1,290) - the equivalent of two extra days' holiday - simply because you knew the "Club" reduced its all-inclusive daily rate from \$1,300 to \$1,000 on January 11, and you timed your visit accordingly.

Many luxury hotels around the world cut their seasonal rates overnight by as much as 30-40 per cent on

certain dates of the year in response to changes in demand or climate, which have no effect on guests booking "close to the line". Nothing about the hotels themselves has changed, except their charges.

Knowing exactly when and where such reductions occur enables you to enjoy High Season Times at Low Season Prices in some of the world's most desirable destinations.

Let the following calendar be your guide to making chic cheap wherever in the world you travel this year. Whether booking a one-week holiday, or embarking on a 12-month global tour, you can now do so, happy in the knowledge that you are saving money - thanks to this savvy sylvan's guide to "Economy Chic".

## JANUARY

Its rough-hewn island charm and world class watersports

make The Blue Safari Club (see above) an enticing January hideaway, which blends the relaxed intimacy of a private home with the facilities of a luxury resort. Decorated with colourful local furnishings, its 10 thatched, coral-stone "bandas" are charming.

Most memorable, however, are nights spent drifting off-shore in the resort's own authentic Arabian dhow. (Contact: Cazenove & Loyd Safaris: 0181-875 9666.)

## FEBRUARY

As many of the world's most coveted, privately owned chalets are priced by the month, save your New Year's skiing plans until February 1 when Christmas holiday rates drop.

Let for \$5,600 a week until the end of January, and for only \$4,200 thereafter, the idyllically rustic Cabin in the Sky, Telluride, Colorado, is a replica of a log hut on

Ralph Lauren's nearby ranch and must rate as the cosiest Rocky Mountain eyrie you could find. (See Annie Wilson's back page story on the area's skiing.) Sleeps four. (Discover Telluride 001 970 728 3631; fax 728 5771.)

## MARCH

March is the month to visit La Residencia - an enclave of gracefully restored manor houses, dating from the 16th century, in the Majorca mountain village of Dela that was once home to Robert Graves.

Before March 31, you can enjoy a seven-night (dinner, bed and breakfast) stay, including dinner in the Michelin-starred El Olivo Restaurant on three evenings, and business class flights from Heathrow to Palma, for a fraction over £1,000 a person.

From April 1, expect to pay around £1,400 for

such pleasures. (Virgin Hotel Collection: 0800-718919.)

## APRIL

For \$4,200, you could pass the week of April 7-14 in a bijou, one-bedroom, ocean-front cottage at Pink Sands - Chris Blackwell's super-chic celebrity hideaway on Harbour Island, in the Bahamas.

Alternatively, laze away the days between April 15 and 22, in the very same cottage, for a mere \$2,800, as the resort's rates drop from \$600 to \$400 a night. (Island Outposts: 0800 614790.)

## MAY

Villa prices on Mustique plummet by around 40 per cent in May. Even though it is one of the island's sunniest months of the year, suddenly the world's most extravagantly priced beach houses become relatively affordable.

The rustic, red-tiled "Tetto Rosso" - a three-bedroom villa surrounded by verandas, patios, gardens and pool, situated among the island's inland hills - reduces its rates most dramatically, from \$5,500 to only \$2,500 a week. (Mustique Villas: 01628-585617.)

## JUNE

Wait until June 1, and a night in a "deluxe hillside casita" at Amanpulo, on the private Philippine island of

Pamalican, will only cost you \$500.

Last night's guests will have paid \$675 for the pleasure of staying in these modern versions of ancient Filipino "bahay kubo" houses, in this the most sleek of Amanresorts. (UK reservations: 0800 151535.)

## JULY

Laid-back and quintessentially Greek, Pietra e Mare stands on a craggy hillside, overlooking a bay and long white beach on the Cycladic island of Mykonos.

Occupying eight white-washed houses of plaster and rough-hewn stone, its 19 suites are furnished in a plain but elegant style, and open on to shaded terraces and a pool.

Until July 15, a night in one of these one-bedroom suites will cost only \$125. Next day, prices rise to \$200. (Chandris Hotels: tel 00 301 3906200, fax 00 301 9425055.)

## AUGUST

Tourists avoid Morocco in August, believing the myth that it will be too hot. In response, hotels almost give their rooms away. Even the city's most desirable private villas are known to drop their rental rates.

Rising from La Palmerie, a grove of grand, walled estates, just outside the city, Dar Tamana optimises the serene beauty of Moroccan architecture and interior design. Little wonder it has

attracted such guests as Giorgio Armani, Gianfranco Ferre and Donna Karan.

For the second week of a two-week let, its August rates drop by 35 per cent, from \$16,500 to a more affordable \$10,725.

(Rates quoted for eight guests. Sleeps eight to 20. The Far Pavilions: tel: 00 212 4301557; fax: 00 212 4301511.)

## SEPTEMBER

September is a great time to try out The Tides, Island Outposts' recently opened showcases, rising from the sands of South Beach in Miami's Art Deco district.

While all 45 of the hotel's suites boast ocean views, those from the Terranova Penthouse's 1,000 sq ft roof terrace are tops.

A September night here, in the highest suite on Ocean Drive, is yours for only \$1,100. In a matter of weeks, it's the rise in its price - to \$2,000 a night - that will make you dizzy. (Island Outposts UK 0800-614790.)

## OCTOBER

Anguilla's Arabesque Cap Juluca is one of the Caribbean's most seductive and photogenic resorts - a sleek crescent of white domes, turrets and arched colonnades, curving round a mile-long beach of pearly sand.

With arguably some of the best hotel bathrooms in the world, its villas would be a delight anytime, but are most tempting in October

just before the cost of a 1,550 sq ft one-bedroom patio suite rises from only \$555 to \$880 a day (on November 1). (UK reservations: 0800 151535.)

## NOVEMBER

Relax in a one-bedroom, beach-front suite, ensconced in lush tropical greenery, at the Rosewood resort of Little Dix Bay, Virgin Gorda, in the British Virgin Islands, for only \$690 a night until November 15.

In just over a month's time, you would be paying \$1,300 for the privilege of being pampered there. (Rosewood Hotels and Resorts: tel 0171-333 7013; fax 333 7033.)

## DECEMBER

Book into Rosewood's recently refurbished Caneel Bay, on St John, in the US Virgin Islands, before December 19 and you can stay in a beach-front room for only \$475 a night.

One day later, right through until April 1, you will have to pay \$650 for the same pleasure. (Rosewood Hotels and Resorts: as above.)

Follow this calendar rigorously, adhering to its schedule of one week's tactically booked holiday every month, and you will save a substantial sum by December - the perfect excuse for celebrating next Christmas abroad - in a wildly extravagant and imprudent manner.

## TRAVEL BROCHURE GUIDE

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## Little airlines aim high

Farrol Kahn on how competition against the big boys is growing

**T**he growth of regional airlines has made Europe a smaller place. Debonair and Easyjet fly to popular cities, while Eurowings has put Germany and Poland on the map. Regional Airlines, from Clermont-Ferrand, has done the same for France, and Meridiana has developed Sardinia as a resort. Air Baltic has brought the medieval city of Riga closer and Crossair has created a highway to four Swiss cities from eight airports.

"Regional airlines are a boom for business and leisure travellers as they can depart as close as possible to their homes and arrive as close as possible to their destinations," says Mario Rahuksa, president of Austrian Airlines.

"They bring in their wake the age of stress-free air travel with new routes from secondary airports." Caroline Hawkins, a television director from London, recently flew to Barcelona on Debonair. It took her an hour to drive to Luton, where it was easy to park the car and cost just £4.50 a day.

"I was relaxed about the experience," she says. "There was no hassle at the airport and I only paid £130 return. On board the interiors were lovely compared to the tacky ones of charters." Low prices induce passengers to try the regional airlines. Sir Michael Bishop, chairman of British Midland, says: "Competition has driven down the high prices on some routes where two carriers have the monopoly. Our presence on the Heathrow-Zurich service

shared by British Airways and Swissair inspired an immediate 21 per cent drop in the lowest available business class fare." Now promotional fares can be as cheap as £99 return.

However, there are several obstacles to overcome before passengers will endorse the regionals - psychological drawbacks and surface transport infrastructure among them. Passengers must overcome prejudice when departing

from airports other than Heathrow and Gatwick. Both symbolise international flying. To some, flying from Stansted, Luton or the City Airport carries less kudos. Caroline Young, an editor on the UK magazine *The Field*, flew from Luton to Edinburgh on Easyjet with her two young children.

"It was a piece of cake," she said. "There were no queues at the check-in desk and the parking was easy." There were disadvantages though. The journey from Alton, Hampshire, took two hours and there was a scramble at the luggage reclaim area on their return because of the lack of carousels. Young added: "In spite of saving on the ticket - only £48 return and on the parking, we at first resisted coming to Luton Airport."

Although more than 65m passengers fly on regional airlines, throughout Europe the growth rate will probably never be as spectacular as that in the US. "The mobility rate in Europe is not as high as in America," says Herbert Bammer, also a president of Austrian Airlines. "The kids in the US want to move away from their families earlier than their European counterparts and cheap airfares enable them to. In Europe, the greatest desire of the young is to own a car."

As the rail and road infrastructure in Europe is better than in the US, these modes of transport offer strong competition to air travel. "British motorists, on average, are happy to drive 500 to 600 miles on holidays mainly to France," says Sue Wharmby of the AA motoring organisation. "The flexibility of the car makes it an attractive alternative to flying."

Railways are also well developed on Continental Europe, which again affects small air carriers. "They have to have a better product than a major airline to attract passengers," says Helmut Woelki, whose company, LSG Luftansa Service, supplies more than 250 international airlines with food. "They need to have nice stewardesses, good food and other benefits as they operate small aircraft and have no network."

Tyrolean Airlines excels in providing appetising food. Breakfast includes six types of fresh rolls baked on the day, and a hot service of scrambled eggs, sausage, spinach and croissant.

It has taken 10 years to achieve deregulation in Europe. "Now anyone can buy an aircraft and fly anywhere," says Kjell Fredheim of Blue Scandinavia, who established Air Baltic.

Ticket prices are tumbling - £19 one-way between capitals is offered by Ryanair - as the regionals are more sensitive to market demands than national airlines. Airports such as Southampton and Sheffield are also aiming to provide seamless travel to the local population.

Farrol Kahn is director of the Aviation Health Institute, 8 King Edward St, Oxford OX1 4HL.



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# There's white gold in them hills

Arnie Wilson looks at how a Colorado town kept itself alive

In the mining days, severe winters could turn one of the most heavenly spots in the US into a freezing hell. Yet when the sun returned and the wildflowers bloomed so profusely, the miners sometimes thought they were in paradise.

Telluride huddles beneath huge cliffs of rock at the end of the San Miguel Valley. The San Juan mountains "tower mightily on three sides". Back in the 1880s, "under any rock might lie the beginning of a man's fortune".

Indeed, the only reason for Telluride's colourful, devil-take-the-hindmost existence at the end of this quite superb box canyon - banishing the once proud Ute Indians from one of their most sacred hunting grounds - was the relentless search for gold and silver.

But gradually, the mines began to close. And Telluride almost shrivelled up and died.

One man saved them - according to a comic-strip, at least.

This picturesque but remote mining town's only hope of not becoming a ghost town was to transform itself into a skiing area. But how? It was a job that could almost have been made for Superman.

"If we could just bring some skiers here to see this place," says an old miner in the bar of the Last Dollar Saloon, "this old town would come alive again."

But how we gonna get all them lifts and things in? echoes another distraught old-timer.

Twenty-five years ago, it was a job for Tellurider, a green crusader depicted in a special "spine-tingling" comic, to usher in the new skiing area which would not only save Telluride but open up some of the most magnificent skiing perspectives in

the Rockies. But how to find him? Instead of alerting the gormless Clark Kent, the townsfolk are overheard by Little Billy Moon, a "wiry western miner" who discovers a huge nugget of gold which tells him that by saying the word Molals backwards he will be transformed into a superhuman hero who will single-handedly build the ski area and defeat the evil Leveler.

"Stand back boys, I have work to do," he says, hurtling across the San Juans to begin his Herculean task. The rest, as they say, is history.

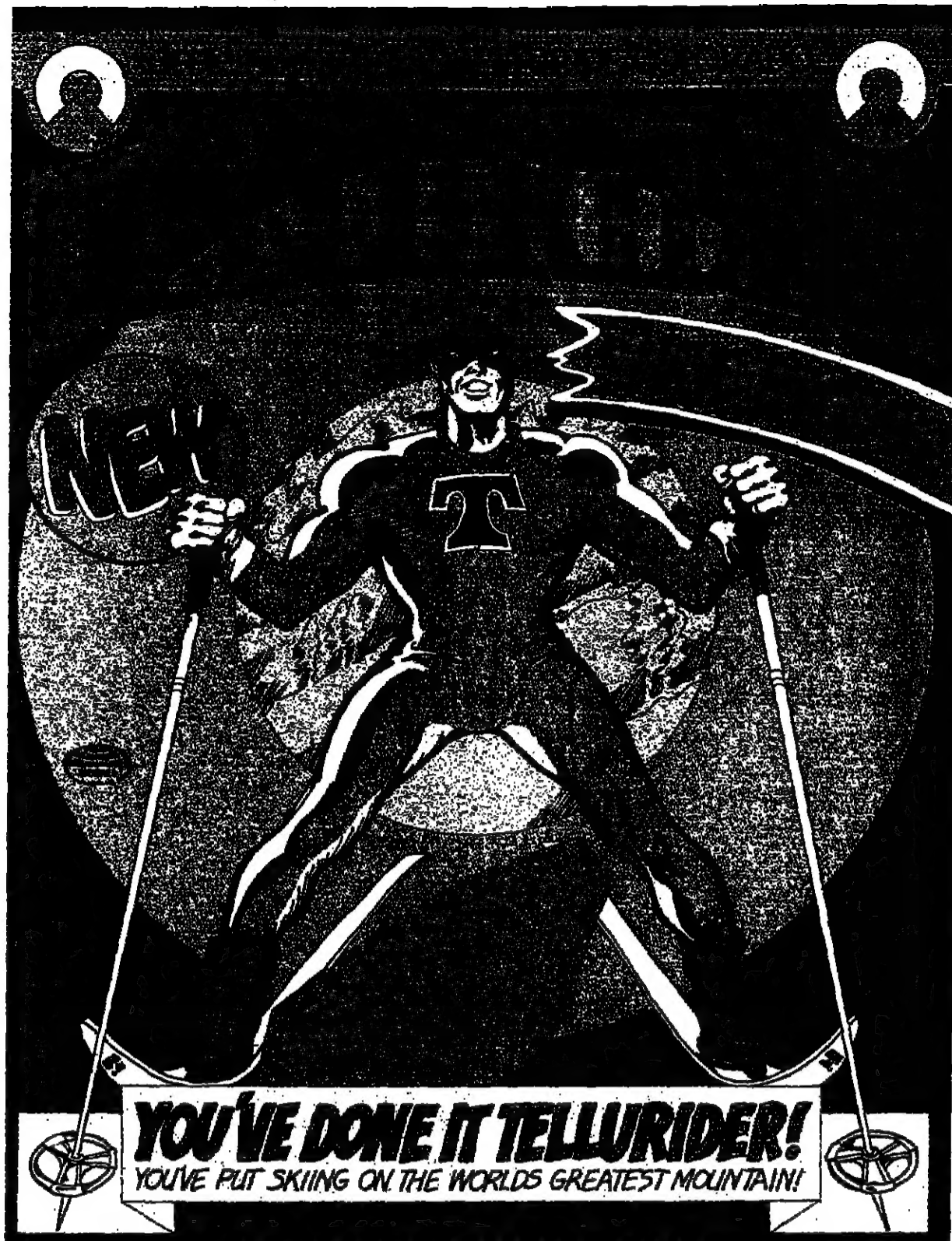
Now, 35 years on, partly thanks to its remote location in the wilds of south-west Colorado, Telluride remains deliciously unspoilt, still cocooned in a time-capsule of sorts, with a main street (Colorado Avenue) positively reeking of 19th century ambience.

It would scarcely come as a surprise if Butch Cassidy and his Wild Bunch were to drift into town and rob the San Miguel Valley Bank of \$24,000 all over again - just as they did in the summer of 1889.

The Galloping Goose, a bizarre hybrid of railway engine and van, tethered near the archetypal wild-west court-house, reminds one of a long-gone era - even though this "last gasp of a dying railroad" was still running until October 1961.

The new Mountain Village, growing apace on a high-mountain plateau linked by a smart new gondola with the old town (but mercifully not visible), is not to everyone's taste. It may be a godsend: modern development which would ruin the old town is finding expression out of harm's way in the new village instead.

Having said that, my downtown hotel, The Colum-



bia (the town's old name until confusion over post being mis-directed to another Columbia prompted the change to Telluride), was almost brand new, but built strictly according to Telluride's "neo-Victorian" planning regulations.

Smoking in most of Telluride is definitely frowned on, but at the Hotel Columbia it is almost regarded as a crime.

"Failure to comply with our no-smoking policy will result in a \$300 (£184) deodorising fee," said the sign in my charming room. "Additionally, any loss of revenue which results from our inability to re-rent the room due to smoking will be at your expense."

Once a grand saloon in the thriving mining camp of Telluride, the hotel's Cosmopolitan Restaurant, with its cherry-wood bar, conceals something special in the wine cellar: a "tasting cellar", where for around \$50 (plus wine) the chef, Chad Scothorn, indulges up to 30 customers in fine wines and exotic dishes.

We enjoyed seared foie gras and divers' scallops on a white truffle base, cold smoked catfish with a caviar remoulade, grouper in lobster broth with sweet potatoes and bittersweet chocolate soufflé with a passion fruit caramel. If the miners

were still around today, they would have been agast at such fare.

The après ski, as in so many Colorado resorts, tends to be bar-and-pool oriented; you can still while away a pleasant, if somewhat raucous evening in the Last Dollar Saloon.

And what of the skiing area which the Tellurider - and friends - threw together with such determination a quarter of a century ago? If you like steep, long, well-groomed trails like See For Ever (you can actually see almost 150 miles into Utah's La Sal mountains) and serious bump runs (Kant Mak'm and Mammoth) coupled with remarkable scenery, and views of Telluride peeping out from between your straddled skis as you pause for breath, the area will captivate you as it did me the first time I skied there a decade ago.

As with almost every other attempt at "progress" in Telluride, moves to expand are constantly frustrated by environmental groups, which is perhaps no bad thing.

The development of Gold Hill and Prospector Bowl - which would open up significant lift-served slopes for experts and intermediates - have been in the pipeline for ever, and seem set to stay there for a few more years yet. Like the town itself, changes on the slopes come slowly. Exasperatingly slowly for the ski area owners. But time capsules - like good wines - should not be opened hastily.

Arnie Wilson flew to Colorado with United Airlines (tel: 0845 8441777). He stayed at the Columbia Hotel on West San Juan Avenue, Telluride.

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## Ski Touring My higher education in France

Nicholas Woodsworth enjoys a less popular snow sport

I had never imagined Marseille as a city of skiers. The Marseillais were, I thought, drinkers of pastis, players of boules, tellers of tall tales. But then I had never been on the Route Nationale 96 on a Friday evening in winter.

In cars topped with loaded ski-racks, Marseillais weekend skiers clogged the road by the tens of thousands. And why wouldn't they - I thought as I crawled along behind them - with some of the best skiing in Europe lying just three hours north of home? At the end of the Nationale 96 lies Briançon, a hub for a busy ski industry. From here top-class resorts, including Montgenèvre, home of the earliest world ski championships, and Serre-Chevalier, the largest ski resort in the southern French Alps, are only minutes away.

But I was off the brasserie of the big-time ski resorts. I was off moonboots and snowboards, long waits for lifts, pushy kids, ski-condo villages and alpine fashion victims. It was all too competitive, too cool, too crowded. I was going skiing, nonetheless, but to a different kind of skiing. Twenty minutes past Briançon I turned off the highway into the Clarée Valley and the wholly different world of high-mountain Nordic ski touring.

Half-way up the valley and at the road's end, not even the village of Nevache seemed entirely of the modern world. Other valleys in this long-inhabited area lead somewhere but the Clarée Valley, its upper end terminated in a tangle of mountains, leads nowhere. Isolated from the outside world, eking for centuries the barest of livings from alpine farming, the village of Nevache today seems reluctant to acknowledge that anything like mechanised lifts and après-ski discotheques even exist.

Where else could you find a simple, old-world mountain place like the Café Guillaume, where, in narrow streets of stone houses and snow-covered wooden haylofts, I stopped to warm myself?

Denise Guillaume's café appeared to be the front room of her home, which, in fact, it was. An old brown panelled floor beside an oil heater. Plates and glasses sat stacked in glass-fronted shelves. Beneath the head of a chamois mounted on the wall, a tap running icy mountain water kept her cold in a sink. With diminutive, elderly Madame Guillaume directing operations from a large woodstove in the kitchen, it was as homely as could be.

So, too, was La Decouverte, the auberge where that evening, at a communal *gîte d'étape* table, I consumed the heartiest of mountain meals - lamb from the high alps and a gratin of potatoes and wild mushrooms, helped down with draughts of red wine.

Like me, the other auberge guests were skiers of a particular sort. Cowherding and terraced farming has largely disappeared from the valley today. In its place in winter come outsiders who like to enjoy the pleasures of peace and quiet along with their skiing.

For the Clarée Valley remains that rare and delightful thing - a place of exceptional natural beauty unspoiled by commercial development. It might have gone the way of other ski areas. But in a prolonged and bitter dispute - locals recall it as a kind of civil war - champions of conservation wrested it from the hands of hotel, ski resort and commercial developers. Declared a national protected site a decade ago, it is alpine ski-touring heaven.

The next morning, skis on my feet, I set out up the valley. The equipment I had, on resembled neither the heavy, fixed-heel gear of downhill skiing nor the fragile and ultra-light mate-

rial of the cross-country skier. Suited to the demands of climbing and descending untracked slopes in mountain country, the equipment of the alpine ski-tourer falls between the two.

For my ascent up the valley I was wearing sturdy boots attached at the toe only to skis that were steel-edged but lighter and narrower than downhill skis. For still more rigorous expeditions, alpine tourers use heavier boots with heels which can be loosened for climbing upwards and fixed for the ski descent.

Attached to the bottom of my skis were strips of nylon, still called by the traditional name - seal skin. It allows no-slip traction on uphill climbs, and is removed for the descent.

It was early spring, T-shirt weather. At Nevache, at 5,000ft, the beating sun had turned the snow soft and sugary and melted. As I climbed, my rucksack straps pulling into my shoulders, I could smell baking earth and rock and the coming season gathering its strength.

I set a leisurely pace, enjoying the sun, the cloudless, impossibly blue sky, and snow which grew ever deeper as I progressed. One hour found me high up in pine woods on the valley wall, a second following the banks of the desiccating Clarée River, a third on a broad expanse of alpine meadow, a fourth plucking in a snow-buried hamlet of shepherd's huts.

The day wore on and the kilometres slipped by. Several times I passed trails leading to mountain refuges hidden in smaller side-valleys giving on to the Clarée, but I carried on.

The air grew colder, the snow harder and glassier. As the sun fell through the afternoon sky the shadows became longer and deeper, and the steep, pointed Dolomite peaks enclosing the valley turned a deep, ruddy colour. Near sunset I passed the true line; for the last few kilometres I found myself in that odd, empty and starkly beautiful high-altitude world of rock and ice and snow.

It was not entirely empty, however. Battling up against the mountains at the end of the valley, 2,000ft higher than Nevache, I finally arrived at the *Rafuge des Docteurs*.

Maintained by the Club Alpin Français, it provides no-frills accommodation for hard-core alpine enthusiasts. Dormitories sleep eight in bunk beds and - in order that the 5am departures of some do not disturb the slumber of others - have no lighting. Bathroom facilities are rudimentary, meals simple.

None of this matters to the groups of true mountain lovers who each evening gather there after a long day on the snow. After dinner I watched them preparing the gear they would wear in pre-dawn departures to distant peaks.

Would I follow them? I had, it seemed, a great deal to learn about a new kind of skiing. My own path lay downwards to the Route Nationale 96 and the rat-race of the lowlands. But, I knew, I would be back again. My higher education was only beginning.

Nicholas Woodsworth is a freelance writer and editor. He is currently working on a book about the French Alps.

Arnie Wilson flew to Colorado with United Airlines (tel: 0845 8441777). He stayed at the Columbia Hotel on West San Juan Avenue, Telluride.

result in a \$300 (£184) deodorising fee," said the sign in my charming room. "Additionally, any loss of revenue which results from our inability to re-rent the room due to smoking will be at your expense."

Once a grand saloon in the thriving mining camp of Telluride, the hotel's Cosmopolitan Restaurant, with its cherry-wood bar, conceals something special in the wine cellar: a "tasting cellar", where for around \$50 (plus wine) the chef, Chad Scothorn, indulges up to 30 customers in fine wines and exotic dishes.

We enjoyed seared foie gras and divers' scallops on a white truffle base, cold smoked catfish with a caviar remoulade, grouper in lobster broth with sweet potatoes and bittersweet chocolate soufflé with a passion fruit caramel. If the miners

were still around today, they would have been agast at such fare.

The après ski, as in so many Colorado resorts, tends to be bar-and-pool oriented; you can still while away a pleasant, if somewhat raucous evening in the Last Dollar Saloon.

And what of the skiing area which the Tellurider - and friends - threw together with such determination a quarter of a century ago? If you like steep, long, well-groomed trails like See For Ever (you can actually see almost 150 miles into Utah's La Sal mountains) and serious bump runs (Kant Mak'm and Mammoth) coupled with remarkable scenery, and views of Telluride peeping out from between your straddled skis as you pause for breath, the area will captivate you as it did me the first time I skied there a decade ago.

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the week  
with...

WORLD NEWS  
Brussels acts  
to curb high  
levels of noise  
from machines

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